

Rationale for Foreign Language Writing Development Via Overseas Internet Email

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of teaching professionals have acknowledged the value of electronic mail (email) as a vehicle for more efficient acquisition and teaching of knowledge and skills. The field of SLA¹ and pedagogy is no exception. Growing interests in the capabilities this technology offers have been exemplified in the reports of recent email projects and in the active exchange of ideas and experiences recorded by the members of online discussion groups such as TESL-L.²

What follows is by no means a technical explanation by a computer network engineer nor an inside report by an email project coordinator. It is rather a view of a language educator who envies those with fully networked terminals at work and enough resources to start a novel email project.

The paper aims to (1) introduce, in general terms, the conveniences and possibilities of email communication for SLA to those colleagues who are yet to experience it, (2) provide theoretical support for the use of email in L2³ development, and especially (3) propose foreign language writing development through a correspondence composition course using overseas email.

One point to be made clear before discussing email for SLA is that this is not an argument for completely replacing the conventional classroom teaching. The proposed method should be viewed as a means of supplementing the conventional method as both benefit the learners in different ways.

2. Background

2.1. Electronic mail (Email)

Email is a system of delivering electronic texts automatically on a computer network, in which network users with email accounts can send or receive texts created at computer terminals. This may be viewed as a postal delivery system realized on the networks of computers rather than the networks of post offices. Just like a post card travels from the

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¹Second language acquisition. As it does in many cases for the sake of simplicity, this abbreviation refers, throughout this paper, to the acquisition of language other than the speaker's native language. When spelled in full, it refers exclusively to the acquisition of such a language while living in the target language community as opposed to foreign language learning, which takes place where the target language is not spoken.

²Teachers of English as a Second Language Listserv. One of the electronic mailing list servers for those sharing a common interest. Members can send email messages to the server, which will automatically send copies of the messages to all members on the list, thereby enabling public discussion among the members.

³Second language. L2 refers to non-native language throughout this paper.

sender through the postal network to the recipient, an email document written on a computer travels from the sender's computer terminal through the computer network to the recipient's email account. The sender creates a document on a word-processing application and sends it off to the recipient's account on an email application at a computer terminal. On the other end of the network, the recipient can check the arrival of the message and read it by using one of the email applications at a computer terminal.

2.2. The Internet

Two or more computers physically and logically connected in such a way that permits data transfer between and among them form a Local Area Network (LAN). A LAN can be connected to other LANs or to a network of LANs. Thus, a LAN may be self-contained in a computer lab, it may be connected to other LANs in one school building, or it may be connected to a network of LANs for the entire campus. In fact, one school's network of LANs may be connected to a college network in a particular region, it may be a part of a nation-wide college network, or it may even be a part of a network of networks spread all around the world. The largest such world-wide network of computers, linked by means of an industry-standard data transfer protocol, is known as the Internet.⁴

2.3. Email on the Internet

As mentioned previously, LAN users may exchange email messages with the other members on the LAN. If the LAN is linked to the Internet and the users are assigned Internet email addresses, then they are on the Internet and they may use the email system to exchange documents with anyone with an email address on this world-wide computer network. Having access to the Internet email system makes fast, low-cost international text exchange possible.

Between many areas of the world, email delivery takes no more than a few hours. It may not be as fast as facsimile, but its cost efficiency and the convenience of exchanging electronic documents, which can be easily stored and edited for future use, are far more appealing.

In principle, the running cost of this world-wide network is shared by the participating institutions and much of the information provided on the network for academic purposes is free of charge. At more and more institutions for higher learning, access to the Internet is considered as similar to access to daily necessities such as electricity or water. Although each institution is covering some cost, the cost per user is

⁴See Wyman (1993) for more details on the Internet for L2 professionals.

small. Therefore, in most cases, the Internet users in the academic community, including college faculty and students, need not worry about access fees or international telephone charges, unlike when using facsimile or commercial computer networks.

In a growing number of colleges or universities around the world, and especially in the United States, the use of Internet is becoming a daily routine. Use of email for communication between the instructor and students and submission of writing assignments is becoming common.

3. Email for L2 development

3.1. Reports of email use in L2 development

Because the Internet email enables inexpensive long-distance communication, it is natural that language educators, and especially L2 educators, have started to pay attention to its capabilities for use in the development of learner's L2.

Lunde (1990) discussed email's value as a means of foreign language study and instruction and introduced his experience of improving his Japanese through exchanging email messages with his Japanese pen pals. There has been a report on an interuniversity project, in which students from Stanford, Harvard, and the University of Pittsburgh exchanged email messages in French to collaborate on their French publication. (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993) Also, one group of ESL instructors at a U.S. college set out what they called a "distance education" project, in which students in South America worked on pre-entry assignments via email (Goodwin, Hamrick & Stewart, 1993). On TESL-L, Warschauer (1994)⁵ requested success stories of email use for ESL and summarized the responses that he received from at least 17 ESL professionals.

3.2. Rationale for email use in L2 development

The field of SLA acknowledges the significance of affective variables in the development of learners' interlanguage and recommends relaxed communicative opportunities and environments that foster motivated learning.

The procedure of checking email delivery is somewhat analogous to checking messages on the telephone answering machine although the medium is different. The user activates the email software to check if any message has arrived, and, if finding that one has arrived, uses the command for reading it and sees the message pop up on the display. Also, even though email can be used for very formal writing, conversational

⁵This is a document retrieved from TESL-L's text archive. A part of it is reproduced in the Appendix as a sample for those readers who do not have access to the Internet.

expressions are common even between strangers. This may be attributed to the very purpose of email: fast written communication. To take full advantage of this technology, email users seem to prefer spontaneous but brief and direct writing without ceremonious or unnecessarily large texts, which take more time creating and possibly spoil speedy data transmission not only for themselves but also for the email recipients or even others sharing the network. This pressure-free environment and conversational nature of email encourage relaxed language production.

The casual atmosphere of email should work in favor of productive SLA. When the learners are not under pressure for immediate and accurate language production, they are likely to produce more language, thus gaining more experience putting together available linguistic resources for successful communication. Application of newly learned linguistic points in real communicative situations will consolidate the knowledge for better linguistic competence, and the increased use of the language will lead to faster language processing.

No matter how conversational email messages can be, they are still pieces of writing. That means the email users can read their own text on screen as they compose it, a process which enables much easier monitoring of their own language output than when speaking. It is a common understanding among L2 researchers that adequate monitoring of one's own language production is more likely to contribute to interlanguage development than leaving it unmonitored.

The excitement of checking and reading email resembles that of checking conventional postal mail or taped messages on a telephone answering machine. People normally enjoy receiving information through mail or telephone messages. In this regard, essays delivered on email may be met with more excitement and stand a much better chance of getting read than scribbled essays on a notepad for exchange in class. L2 learners, aware of this, will recognize that texts they create are truly for communication, and they will have motivation for more language production and exchange of messages.

4. Overseas Internet email for foreign language development

Email exchange for language training within a LAN or a wider domestic network is advantageous. However, in an environment where the target language is a foreign language rather than a second language, it is the international exchange of messages that maximizes email's potential for developing L2 competence and skills.

Communicating with someone overseas using the Internet email is as exciting and motivating as (or more so than) exchanging letters or telephone messages with someone abroad. Provided that the learners have positive attitude toward the target language culture and speakers, it is natural to assume that they have stronger motivation to communicate with someone overseas in the target language community than someone in the same classroom or the same region.

As Lunde (1990) points out, the quickness of message's arrival is also a factor which should contribute to a higher motivation to write. When exchanging regular airmail across the Pacific, a reply should take two weeks or more. On the Internet, an overnight reply is very common.

In terms of communicative opportunities and access to authentic language input, learners in the foreign language environment are utterly disadvantaged compared to those studying in the target language community. They can not always expect sufficiently challenging and educational linguistic input from their classroom peers either. Unless the learners have local native-speaker friends or pen pals from the target language community abroad, their language instructor will be the only person to provide such linguistic input. Although trained and experienced instructors provide the learners with adequate input, there is a limit to what a single instructor can accomplish in a conventional class setting.

Use of Internet email will supplement the conventional foreign language class by offering more opportunities for the learners to receive linguistic input and practice applying the linguistic rules to real communicative situations.

4.1. Electronic pen pal

One type of possible exchange that is attracting L2 professionals is electronic pen pal communication. Learners exchange email with electronic pen pals from the target language community. The fact that the learners' communication partners are not their language instructors can be both an advantage and a disadvantage of such pen-pal arrangements.

It is an advantage because the learners can be free from the pressure of the evaluation by the instructor. Since formal education has had as its goal the teaching of correct and socially established forms, the learners tend to be more concerned with the formal aspect of language than meaning of the messages when writing to their instructor. When writing to their pen pals, on the other hand, the learners can concentrate on conveying their meaning since there is no pressure of being evaluated on the basis of accurate language use. This is desirable for increasing fluency and communicative competence.

The disadvantage of such arrangements is that pen pals are not professional language educators. Trained language educators take into consideration the state of learners' interlanguage when communicating with them. They use professional judgments in analyzing the learners' writings, locating areas that need special attention, forming effective comments, etc. Pen pals having such abilities would be ideal for the learners' language development, but the learners need to be very lucky to find them. Also, through exchange of messages with pen pals, formal writing skills are not expected to develop as much as casual communicative strategies.

Having electronic pen pals is meaningful in the sense that it creates communicative opportunities for FL learners. However, it is obvious that arranging electronic pen pals

alone will not lead to the total development of FL writing skill.

4.2. Correspondence course via overseas Internet email

Since the system of email is primarily for text data transmission, the field of L2 education can take advantage of the system in the area of graphic communication skills and especially in the writing skill. It is thus not surprising that writing activities were always a part of and often at the center of the reported projects using email.

Using email for a FL writing course will do more than just add novelty and convenience to conventional paper-medium writing skill development. As explained previously, it can create a whole new environment desirable for the acquisition of higher linguistic competence and writing skills from the perspective of L2 acquisition and pedagogy.

Utilizing the technology of email, it seems practicable to have a correspondence composition course. In such a course, a professional language instructor in the target language community would teach learners studying in the foreign language environment via international email. The instructor can send the learners pre-writing activities, exercises, essay assignments, or comments on the learners' essay drafts and suggested revisions. The instructor can, at the same time, be the learners' electronic pen pal by exchanging casual comments with them. Although the learners should be required to write formal paragraphs or essays, they should also be allowed to have relaxed communication with the instructor. As discussed earlier, the use of overseas email should contribute to more production and practice of language. Restricting the learners to only submit assignments of formal essays can counteract such effects.

4.2.1. Information gap and foreign language writing

The most important quality of international email for FL development is the ease with which real information gap could be created between the learners' and their communication partners.

The existence of an information gap has come to gain its place as a necessary condition for communicative L2 development after years of methodological modifications based on our increased understanding of human communication and learning (Johnson, 1979).

While the behavioristic view of language acquisition as a habit formation came to be criticized, the repetitive pattern practice advocated by behaviorists also revealed itself to be problematic for the lack of real communicative purpose or meaningfulness in the task.

To the cognitivists, on the other hand, acquiring one's language meant improving one's linguistic competence: the underlying knowledge of a set of linguistic rules, which is

manifested through linguistic performance in the actual production of sentences. Since it was thought that linguistic competence enabled linguistic performance, the need for learning linguistic rules was stressed. However, while all native speakers of a language could gain competence and apply it for performance in the language without difficulty, non-native speakers rarely gained the same kind of competence as the native speakers' even after a great deal of effort. Also, learning the linguistic rules of a non-native language did not automatically lead to the ability to communicate in the language.

Proposed then was the concept of communicative competence: the learners' ability to apply their linguistic competence appropriately in linguistic performances. For the development of this competence, L2 methodologists acknowledged the need for communicative activities in which the learners find real purpose for communicating. They understood real communication to be the process of giving or receiving information which the recipient would not have had without the communicative act. Since information that is already shared will make the communicative act meaningless, the learners must exchange information that is not yet shared. Thus, information gap has come to be understood as necessary.

Although much of these methodological discussions concerned oral skill development, the same holds true for writing. If the readers already have the information that the writer is presenting in a composition, the purpose of creating the text and comprehending it will be superficial.

The amount of information that the instructor and the learners share must be greater in a conventional composition class than in a correspondence course because they are in the same country, same culture, and very probably same region. Quite frequently, when the students describe some aspects of the local culture, the instructor is already very knowledgeable about them. On the other hand, the instructor overseas is most likely unfamiliar with the learners' local culture, customs, events, etc., and naturally, the learners will have to face communicative challenge.

Also, in an environment where the target language is a foreign language and the classroom peers share a native language, use of the target language can be quite artificial since the learners can communicate perfectly using the common native language. The experience of communicating with those who have different cultural backgrounds and with whom the learners can communicate only through the real use of the target language becomes possible by means of email exchange on the Internet.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that foreign language study is more often for acquiring skill for international communication rather than domestic communication. The Internet provides an ideal environment for practicing international communication.

4.2.2. Prospects

Implementation of a foreign language writing course via overseas email requires sites

in two countries; one where the students study the foreign language and the other where the instructor is in the target language community. Although few single educational institutions are capable of such an operation, international collaborative effort involving established partnership makes it feasible. One kind of partnership that may be suitable for such an operation is between colleges that have some kind of formal exchange programs or transfer agreements. Students can remain in their home country and take an email-based writing course from an instructor at a sister college overseas. The two partner colleges may collaborate to develop a syllabus exclusively for the email-based composition course. The syllabus designers from both sides will have to work closely (perhaps on the Internet) to make a syllabus which maximizes the benefit of this operation.

5. On the periphery

There are also some ways in which use of email supports the teaching and learning of L2 writing in a less direct manner.

Since delivered email can be stored electronically and automatically, diachronic observation of the learners' writings becomes significantly easier, and the instructor will be able to give the learners adequate feedback based on the results of such observation. For instance, the instructor may want to confirm recurring errors in a series of one student's writing rather than pointing out each occurrence of it. On paper, this could be very time consuming, but using electronically stored composition, such an analysis is possible on common word processors equipped with search function. Other computational analyses such as measuring the length of a composition, computing the average sentence length or finding occurrences of particular words will not take a computer expert either. Findings from such analyses may be used to give proper guidance to the writers.

Email also reduces the instructor's burden of class management. A composition course inevitably involves a large number of submissions, and keeping track of them requires a great deal of effort. However, since email messages are easily stored and automatically dated and timed, it will save hours of tedious work. Also, because it is possible to send a message to a defined group, distribution of texts to the class to praise an outstanding work, for instance, or to present a reference can be accomplished without laboring to prepare hard copies. Consequently, the instructor can channel more energy and attend more to the teaching itself.

6. Conclusion

Internet email potentially provides significantly improved learning opportunities for foreign language learners. It may even close the gap between the foreign language

environment and the second language environment.

One format that is drawing attention of L2 professionals is the pen-pal-type exchange. It will provide the learners with pressure-free communicative opportunities and facilitate interlanguage development. However, not much can be expected from non-teacher pen pals in terms of instructional guidance and formal writing development, and its limitation must be taken into account.

Another type of email use to be planned for L2 development is an overseas correspondence course on the Internet. In such a course students in a foreign language environment can exchange email with an instructor who is in the target language community. This format can complement the conventional class situation by providing real and natural information gap, which is a required condition for communicative language development but tends to be lacking in the foreign language environment. Overseas correspondence courses may be possible between sister colleges around the world. Such colleges should collaborate to prepare syllabi which will make the most effective use of the unique environment.

In most cases, foreign language learners study the language for international communication. The time has come when they can practice their target language through real international communication.

Appendix

This file is from the archives of the TESL-L Electronic Discussion Forum for teachers of English as a second or foreign language. If you print out or otherwise distribute this file, we would appreciate your leaving this note at the top of it, so that our colleagues can know where it came from and how they can get further files from the archives. Access to the TESL-L archives is limited to members of TESL-L. To become a member of TESL-L (which will not only give access to the complete archives, but also the chance to participate in online discussions and to join the TESL-L special interest branches) do the following:

Send a message to listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu

Sub tesl-l firstname lastname

For example:

Sub tesl-l Bill Clinton

We hope you enjoy and benefit from the file you have chosen.

. . . Bruce Roberts (roberts@stolaf.edu), one of the coordinators of IECC, makes some very interesting comments which I think are best quoted in full: "There is a significant difference in educational outcome depending on whether a teacher chooses to incorporate email classroom connections as 1) an ADD-ON process, like one would include a guest speaker, or 2) an INTEGRATED processes, in the way one would include a new textbook. The email classroom connection process seems sufficiently complex and time consuming that if there are goals beyond merely having each student send a letter to a person at a distant school, the ADD-ON approach can lead to frustration and less-than-expected academic results. . .

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